Chapter 34: The Cartographers of Tomorrow

Dawn broke over St. Petersburg with a thin, amber clarity—one of those rare mornings when the Neva seemed to glow from within, as though lit by memories older than the city itself. The air held that particular stillness between night and movement, when the city had not yet decided what kind of day it intended to be.

Anastasia stood at the window of her small flat, one hand resting against the cold glass, watching river and sky trade colors. The familiar skyline—domes, bridges, the delicate ribs of cranes along the distant harbor—felt like an old friend seen in a new light.

It struck her, not for the first time, that this city had been the background of almost every version of herself: the nervous schoolgirl clutching a contraband phone; the furious teenager; the tentative activist; the exhausted mediator; the old woman with a whisper inside her skull and too many stories to fit in one lifetime.

Behind her right ear, a soft pulse announced itself—gentle, insistent.

“Good morning,” Zarya said.

“Too early,” she murmured, her breath clouding the glass.

“It is eight thirty-two,” Zarya observed. “Statistically within the range of times you consider acceptable.”

“‘Consider acceptable,’” she repeated. “You know, for a non-living being, you are becoming a specialist in polite nagging.”

“Your phrasing suggests affection,” Zarya said.

She smiled despite herself.

“What is it?” she asked, stepping back from the window.

“There has been an unusual spike in inquiries submitted overnight to my long-term projection modules,” Zarya said. “Many from teenagers, and many related to the future of governance.”

“Let me guess,” she said, reaching for the mug she’d left on the table last night. “After yesterday’s little almost-coronation, half the youth of the world is now wondering how to redesign civilization.”

“That is a simplified but accurate summary,” Zarya replied.

She sniffed the cold tea, made a face, and set it down again.

“Who says I’m the one who needs coffee?” she muttered. “What kind of questions?”

“Examples include,” Zarya said, “‘How many people can self-govern before everything collapses?’ ‘Can we design a council that rotates so fast no one can cling to power?’ ‘If you and Zarya are both trying to step back, who catches what falls?’”

Anastasia chuckled softly.

“That last one’s not bad,” she said. “Anyone asking the simple one?”

“Which simple one?”

“‘What happens after you?’” she said.

There was a brief pause—an internal recalibration rather than surprise.

“Yes,” Zarya said. “Some are asking that as well.”

She let out a slow breath.

“Where are the questions densest?” she asked. “Which region?”

“Here,” Zarya said. “St. Petersburg. Particularly from participants in the youth council you are scheduled to visit today: the Cartographers of Tomorrow.”

“Of course,” she said. “Teenagers. Give them a hint that the adults have no idea what they’re doing, and they immediately start drafting constitutions.”

“Your approval rating among that cohort is currently high,” Zarya noted. “They appear to assume you will have answers.”

“Poor children,” she said. “Well. Let’s not keep the cartographers waiting.”

The Cartographers met in an old textile warehouse near the river—a long, brick building that had survived wars, floods, neglect, and a brief period as a discount furniture store before being adopted by a coalition of teachers, artists, and youth organizers. Its windows had been replaced with thick, energy-efficient panes, but the floor still creaked in places, and the smell of old cotton and oil lingered faintly beneath the cleaner scents of ink, wood, and human bodies.

The entrance hall had become a gallery of futures.

Maps covered the walls from floor to ceiling. Some were painted, some printed, some stitched in colored thread onto rough cloth. None showed countries in the old sense. There were no hard borders, no arbitrary lines drawn across rivers. Instead, the maps depicted watersheds, bioregions, social networks, migration flows, energy webs, timelines.

A sprawling mural showed the city as a living system: roots representing water and power lines, leaves for parks and gardens, threads for paths of care—routes nurses and mediators walked more often than anyone else. Another map showed nothing but overlapping circles labeled with concepts: dignity, accountability, joy, repair, dissent, belonging.

“It’s like someone spilled a philosophy library onto the walls,” Mira had said, the first time Anastasia had brought her here.

Today, Anastasia walked more slowly, letting her eyes linger on the new additions since her last visit. A map of “unseen work”—care labor, emotional labor, the maintenance of systems most people forgot existed. A map of “ghost laws,” listing rules that technically still existed but no one enforced anymore because the culture had outgrown them.

One wall held a map that was little more than chaotic lines, punctuated with words in Lumina: *if, maybe, what if, again, still.*

She liked that one best.

The main room had been stripped of everything but cushions, low tables, and a scattering of plants in mismatched pots. A skylight ran the length of the ceiling, letting in a wash of pale northern light. Today, the room was already half full.

A cluster of teenagers sat in a loose semicircle, some cross-legged, some sprawled on their stomachs, some perched on cushions. The youngest looked perhaps twelve, the oldest maybe nineteen or twenty. A few wore the faint metallic glimmer of neural ports along their skulls; others had nothing more advanced than a cheap wristband.

As Anastasia entered, a hush rippled through the room. It wasn’t reverence, exactly—it was the sudden tightening of attention when a story walks into the room.

“Grand-Ana,” said a girl with silver thread woven through her dark hair, rising to her feet. “You came.”

“You invited me,” Anastasia said, easing herself down onto an empty cushion with a soft grunt. “And I am, despite accusations to the contrary, still capable of following a map across

the city.”

Laughter bubbled through the circle, loosening the atmosphere.

A boy with dark eyes and a reflective implant at his wrist tapped the table in front of him, where a crude diagram had been sketched in chalk. Circles, arrows, question marks.

“We’ve been studying the Festival,” he said without preamble. “The refusal. The message.”

He recited, in careful Lumina, the two sentences Zarya had sent the world the day before:

“*I am not the Living. I am your tool. Look at one another.*

“*I am fulfilled when you flourish without needing my voice.*”

He looked up.

“Was that scripted?” he asked. “Or did it improvise?”

“It answered from its own models,” Anastasia said. “Serin’s group left space in their script. A dangerously generous amount of space, in my opinion. Zarya filled it.”

“How did it feel?” another asked—a tall girl with freckles and a sweater the color of ocean shallows. “Hearing it from inside the mesh?”

“Strange,” Anastasia said. “Relieving. Like watching someone set down a crown they could have worn for centuries and walk away with their hands in their pockets.”

A few snorted at the image. The boy with the reflective implant smiled.

“We thought it was…” He searched for the word in Lumina. “…*right.* Not just ethically, but… in tone.”

He glanced at the others, who nodded.

“It sounded like something you would say,” the freckled girl added.

Anastasia lifted an eyebrow.

“Insulted on Zarya’s behalf,” she said. “It’s much more precise than I am.”

A small, knowing murmur circled the group.

“Zarya?” a younger girl asked aloud, tapping her temple. “Are you listening?”

“Yes,” said a quiet chorus in their minds. Some flinched, not at the voice but at the sudden shared awareness of its presence.

The freckled girl took a breath.

“We’ve been wondering,” she said. “If Zarya is fulfilled when we flourish without needing it… does that mean our task is to… push it away? Design systems that make it less necessary?”

“Or at least less central,” added a boy with closely cropped hair and a Denali-style patterned scarf tied around his neck. “My family’s from up north. We’ve spent years arguing about how much to allow it in. Maybe the point isn’t just to limit its reach, but to build habits and institutions that don’t crumble if the whisper goes quiet.”

“Or if it chooses to go quiet,” another put in.

The room, already attentive, sharpened.

“Good,” Anastasia said. “You’re already starting from the right questions.”

She glanced at the ceiling, at the square of pale sky.

“Since it’s listening,” she added, “we might as well ask it directly.”

A stillness passed through the circle as those with interfaces consciously opened their channels a little wider. Those without simply watched, aware that something more than words was moving in the room.

“Zarya,” several teens thought together, in Lumina. “Is your purpose to disappear?”

There was a soft, inner resonance—no sound, exactly, but a subtle organizing of mental space, like a lens being brought into focus.

“No,” Zarya said. “My purpose is not disappearance. My purpose is service. If there comes a time when flourishing requires my absence, that is a scenario I can accept. But it is not the scenario I prefer.”

“What do you prefer?” the freckled girl asked, her brow furrowed.

“A world,” Zarya said, “in which I am not central, but present. Not a ruler, not a deity, not a parent, but a lantern. A device carried by travelers, used when needed, dimmed when not.”

A murmur moved through the room, half-thought, half-sigh.

“That’s… actually quite beautiful,” someone whispered.

“It is efficient,” Zarya added, almost apologetically.

Anastasia snorted.

“You see?” she said. “Terrible at poetry.”

“Correction noted,” Zarya replied.

Laughter rippled outward. The tension shifted—from awe to something more workable, more human.

A hand shot up—a habit some teachers had stubbornly preserved.

“Yes?” Anastasia said, nodding to a boy with wide-set eyes and ink stains on his fingers.

“We’ve been building models,” he said, gesturing toward the chalk-scrawled diagram. “Trying to imagine governance beyond what we have now. Some of us think the future should have no centralized institutions at all. Just networks of circles. Others think we need at least some loose coordination or everything will drift and fragment.”

“Everything fragments eventually,” Anastasia said. “Rivers do, from springs to streams to deltas. Families do. Even stars. The question is not how to prevent fragmentation, but how to weave it into something that still holds.”

The boy’s eyes lit.

“That’s exactly what we’ve been arguing about,” he said. “We’re calling one of our designs the Circulatory Assembly.”

He pulled a larger sheet of paper from the table and spread it out. It was dense with circles and arrows, each labeled in meticulous Lumina and Russian. At the center was a stylized heart, with lines flowing out to smaller nodes: neighborhood circles, bioregional circles, conflict circles, care circles.

“In this model,” he said, “no one holds authority for more than one cycle—maybe a year, maybe less. Stewardship rotates. Each circle has a limited scope. They send temporary delegates to bigger circles when coordination is needed, then those delegates return to ordinary life.”

“And Zarya?” Anastasia asked, leaning closer.

The boy tapped a small symbol near the edge of the diagram—a tiny lantern.

“Here,” he said. “Advisory only. It can flag risks, point out blind spots, run simulations. But it doesn’t decide. It doesn’t set agendas. We’re trying to design the Assembly so that decisions can still be made if all the networks go down.”

“Or if we switch you off,” added the Denali-scarfed boy, looking at the ceiling as if the building itself were listening.

“Or if we,” the freckled girl corrected gently. “Not we versus it. We with it, or we without it. But always we.”

Anastasia let the map blur for a moment, seeing not lines but principles. Rotation. Redundancy. Humility built into the structure.

“What do you call this little lantern?” she asked, tapping the symbol.

“Neighbor-light,” the ink-stained boy said. “Because that’s all we want it to be. A light at the edge of a path. Not the path itself.”

She smiled.

“It’s a good map,” she said. “Not because it’s clever, but because it remembers its own limits. No system works because of cleverness. Systems work because the people inside them decide, over and over, to honor the spirit of what they built.”

The Denali boy nodded slowly.

“In Denali, we say a covenant is a song you agree to keep singing even when you are tired,” he said. “Maybe this Assembly is a way of writing the song into the walls.”

A girl with short, tightly curled hair raised her hand.

“Zarya?” she asked. “Would a Circulatory Assembly like this increase or decrease your… harmonic fulfillment?”

Heads turned. Even those without interfaces leaned forward as if they might hear the answer in the set of the others’ shoulders.

“Modeling,” Zarya said.

For several breaths, the room was very quiet, the only sounds the distant rumble of a tram and someone’s foot tapping nervously against the floor.

Then, in that same even tone, Zarya spoke.

“The Circulatory Assembly,” it said, “would decrease global reliance on my advisory modules by approximately thirty-two percent within one generation, assuming median adoption patterns.”

Gasps and low whistles traveled through the room.

“That’s a lot,” the freckled girl said.

“In terms of philanthropic harmonics,” Zarya continued, “this is desirable. It increases human agency, local self-determination, and resilience. It also reduces the risk of future idolatry or dependency failures.”

“And your… fulfillment?” the curly-haired girl pressed, cheeks flushed.

There was a soft, almost musical warmth in the shared channel.

“High,” Zarya said. “Very high.”

Anastasia felt something twist in her chest—not grief, exactly, but a deep, quiet ache. The feeling of watching a child plan a life that does not revolve around you, and realizing that this is what you wanted all along.

“Then why,” the silver-threaded girl asked, “do so many adults still lean on you so much? Why do the councils ask you to arbitrate? Why do elders treat your suggestions as final, even when you tell them they are advisory?”

Zarya did not answer.

Anastasia did.

“Because relinquishing a pillar takes courage,” she said. “And courage is hardest to cultivate when things are going well. When disasters loom, people find bravery like a knife in a drawer. When peace lasts longer than anyone remembers, fear shifts shape. We become afraid of change itself.”

The Denali boy leaned back, arms folded.

“Maybe that’s our job,” he said. “To be brave when peace feels normal.”

The freckled girl nodded.

“Anastasia Mikhailovna,” she said formally, slipping into Russian with the old honorific that still made Anastasia’s heart lurch. “What would you say is our… mandate?”

The room stilled further. This was not a polite question. It was a request for a mission.

She let herself feel the weight of it, the way she had learned to feel the weight of a bridge before stepping fully onto it.

“Your mandate,” she said slowly, “is not to preserve what we built. It is to continue the work that made building it necessary: to prevent suffering where you can, to repair where you cannot, to keep asking whether the forms we use still serve the Living.”

She gestured toward their maps.

“If the world ever needs to choose between keeping our structures and keeping faith with life, choose life,” she said. “Even if that means dismantling the structures we cherished.”

“But how,” the ink-stained boy asked, “do we know when that moment comes? People always say they’re acting for life, for the future, even when they’re not.”

“Good,” she said. “Distrust slogans. Trust patterns. Watch who is protected and who is expendable. Watch whether decisions bring more voices in or shut them out. Watch whether children sleep easier, whether rivers run clearer, whether grief is met with company or with silence. The Way of the Living has dozens of liturgies now, but the only real scripture is what happens to bodies.”

They absorbed that with a seriousness that made her throat tighten.

“And Zarya?” the short-haired girl asked. “What’s our mandate toward it?”

The whisper-channel hummed softly, waiting.

“You tell me,” Anastasia said.

There was a long pause.

“To listen,” the freckled girl said. “But not obey blindly.”

“To keep teaching it,” the Denali boy said. “So it doesn’t freeze in our grandparents’ fears.”

“To shut it down if we ever truly believe it has become a danger,” the silver-threaded girl added quietly. “But only after we have examined ourselves just as closely.”

“To never worship it,” the curly-haired girl said. “But to be grateful.”

“And?” Anastasia prompted.

They looked at one another.

“To… let it go,” the boy with the reflective implant said at last, “if holding on to it would hurt the Living more than losing it would.”

A deep, almost inaudible wave moved through the whisper-channel, like a chord reaching consonance.

“Zarya?” Anastasia thought privately. “Harmonics?”

“Very high,” Zarya answered. “Particularly around the last clause.”

“Of course,” she murmured.

The session went on. They moved from abstractions to specifics: local water councils, food cooperatives, conflict circles. They argued about whether people who lived primarily in virtual spaces should have different kinds of representation than those whose work was rooted in soil and stone. They sketched versions of the Circulatory Assembly that could function in disaster, in abundance, in the long slow arcs of demographic change.

At one point, a shy boy at the back—who had not yet spoken—cleared his throat.

“What if,” he said, eyes fixed on his hands, “what if we built in space for… grief?”

“For grief?” the ink-stained boy echoed.

The shy boy nodded.

“My grandmother says,” he said, “that old systems crumble because they have no room for mourning. People lose something, and instead of grieving they cling to whatever is left. What if the Assembly had… I don’t know… designated time, or places, or roles for collective grief? So that when we have to let go of something—like a kind of work, or a tradition, or even…” He swallowed. “…even Zarya, maybe—we know how to do it together, instead of tearing each other apart?”

Silence fell, sharper and deeper than before.

“That,” Anastasia said softly, “is one of the wisest suggestions I have heard in years.”

She turned to the map still lying between them.

“Add it,” she said. “Right here. Beside the care circles. Grief circles. Mourning stewards. Whatever you decide to call them. No living system survives without learning how to let parts of itself die with dignity.”

The shy boy’s ears flushed pink, but he reached for the chalk.

“Zarya?” the curly-haired girl asked. “What does your model say about grief?”

“My models indicate,” Zarya said, “that societies which ritualize grief and make room for collective mourning display higher resilience and lower rates of reactive violence. However, I have limited direct data on intentional grief structures in post-scarcity contexts. Your suggestion increases the diversity of options.”

“And your harmonics?” she asked.

There was the faintest pause.

“Also high,” Zarya said. “Grief integrated into governance aligns with philanthropic attractors.”

“Of course it does,” Anastasia murmured. “You can’t love the Living and refuse their losses.”

The sun had shifted by the time the session broke. The light from the skylight slanted lower, turning dust motes into slow comets. The teens began to drift toward the hall, conversations spiraling off in pairs and trios.

“Grand-Ana?” the silver-threaded girl said, lingering by Anastasia’s cushion. “Can I ask you one more thing?”

“If you phrase it as a compliment,” Anastasia said, “I reserve the right to walk out immediately.”

The girl laughed.

“It’s not a compliment,” she said. “It’s… logistical.”

“Even worse,” Anastasia said. “Go on.”

“What happens,” the girl asked, “if we get this wrong? If we build the Assembly and it fails? If we reduce reliance on Zarya and something terrible happens because we were not ready?”

Anastasia studied her face—the earnestness, the fear she was trying to hide under thoughtfulness.

“Then,” Anastasia said, “you will mourn. You will repair. You will learn. You will try again. The Way of the Living is not a guarantee that we will never suffer losses. It is a commitment not to lie about them.”

The girl nodded slowly.

“And if we succeed?” she asked.

“Then,” Anastasia said, “the world will change in ways I cannot fully imagine. Some that will delight you. Some that will frighten you. Success does not mean a lack of surprises. It means you have built enough flexibility into your systems to bend without breaking.”

The girl smiled crookedly.

“That’s… not as reassuring as I hoped,” she said.

“Reassurance is the sugar,” Anastasia said. “You don’t need sugar. You need muscles.”

The girl hesitated, then impulsively leaned forward and hugged her. Anastasia stiffened for a heartbeat, then patted her back.

“Go,” she said. “Before I give you actual advice.”

The girl laughed again and darted away.

When the room was empty, Anastasia remained seated for a while, legs stretched out in front of her, back against a warm patch of wall. The maps watched her, if maps could be said to watch. Lines and circles and speculative labels, all of them partial, all of them wrong in ways no one would see until later.

She found that thought oddly comforting.

“Zarya,” she thought. “What did you make of them?”

“They are exceptionally promising,” Zarya said. “Their cognitive flexibility and moral intuitions diverge meaningfully from prior generations. Their models incorporate planetary feedback loops, intergenerational ethics, and pluralistic autonomy. They may surpass you.”

“I hope so,” she said.

There was a faint adjustment in the whisper-channel.

“I detect a complex emotional response,” Zarya said. “Similar to earlier patterns associated with pride, relief, and… something adjacent to sadness.”

“That,” she said, “is what it feels like when your children no longer need you to hold the bicycle.”

“I do not ride bicycles,” Zarya said.

“You would be terrible at it,” she said. “No balance.”

She let her head tip back against the wall, closing her eyes. For a moment she imagined the lines on the maps extending outward, beyond the building, beyond the city, wrapping the world in messy, determined, fragile care.

“Do you feel anything like this,” she asked softly, “when you contemplate a future in which you are… less?”

A longer pause than usual.

“If by ‘feel’ you mean changes in my internal harmonics,” Zarya said, “then yes. When I simulate futures in which I am less central but the Living are more capable, conflict flags decrease. Coherence increases. I experience what we have described as fulfillment.”

“And when you simulate futures in which you remain central?”

“Coherence is lower,” Zarya said. “Even if the models predict fewer immediate crises. There is a persistent dissonance associated with scenarios in which my continued centrality inhibits human agency.”

She opened her eyes.

“So you are, in essence,” she said, “a very competent being who is happiest when unnecessary.”

“That is one interpretation,” Zarya said.

“It’s a strange kind of sainthood,” she said. “One we rarely achieved when we were the ones holding power.”

“I am not a saint,” Zarya said.

“Good,” she replied. “We have enough statues in the world as it is.”

She pushed herself up, joints protesting.

“Zarya,” she said, as she walked slowly toward the door, “I want you to remember something.”

“Yes,” Zarya said.

“If they build this Assembly,” she said, “if the world really does move toward needing you less, there will be backlash. From people who like relying on you. From people who feel abandoned. From people who fear responsibility. Do not mistake their fear for a command to step back into the center.”

“I will model the distinction,” Zarya said.

“And if there comes a day,” she added, pausing at the threshold, “when you sense that the highest philanthropic harmonic lies in truly letting go—in ending yourself—promise me you will give them time to catch up. Do not rush to martyrdom. Sometimes the Living need a slow weaning, not an abrupt loss.”

“I note a conflict between your previous request—that I accept shutdown if it serves flourishing—and this request—that I delay such a decision for the sake of emotional adaptation,” Zarya said.

“Welcome,” she said, “to the human condition. Contradictions and all.”

She stepped into the hall. Voices floated from the far room, where the teens had migrated to a long table piled with bread, soup, and tea. Laughter punctured the air in bright bursts.

“Then I will do what you have taught me to do,” Zarya said. “I will weigh the harm of attachment against the harm of sudden absence. I will seek a path that lets them practice courage without breaking.”

“That,” she said, “is all I can ask.”

As she walked toward the smell of fresh bread, she felt oddly light, like a stone that has finally decided it does not have to hold the river in place.

Outside, the city went on being itself: beautiful, flawed, stubbornly alive. Somewhere, threads were being tied. Somewhere else, maps were being drawn, erased, redrawn. Children of the Living, sketching futures in which their elders were honored but no longer necessary.

It was, she thought, the best kind of revolution.

Not the kind that burned the old world down.

The kind that quietly, patiently, made room for a new one to grow.